

pen. "The size of a golf ball," tapping the picture.
"Or perhaps a tangerine."

Clete sat silently in his wheelchair. Juanita's lower lip trembled. Clete looked at the doctor. The last word the man had uttered flipped on a light switch in Clete's brain: he saw a pulpy orange ball that began sectioning magically. The first wedge floated up away from its source, then another broke off, squirting some of its sweet/acidic juice in a sparkling burst. Clete could almost taste it. "Tangerine," he said.

Juanita jumped in her chair and grabbed the arm rests and looked wide-eyed at her husband.

The doctor knocked Clete's folder off his desk and leaned up out of his chair and said, "That's it, isn't it? That's his first word."

JUST SQUEEZE ME

Ginger had taken to sleeping on Clete's chest on a regular basis since his stroke, and that's where she was when Butch, Bob and Ellis entered the room with their instruments — trombone, saxophone and tuba, respectively. It was to be the first post-stroke blowing session of the Loma Alta Brass Band.

Clete was laid out in the recliner. A bowling tournament played softly on the T.V. Ginger raised her head as the boys entered the room. Bob slipped over and turned the T.V. off, and Ellis huffed a few low notes on the tuba. Juanita opened the curtains to let the harsh, bright sunlight into the room.

Clete woke, rumpled and red-eyed, and brushed Ginger off his chest. Juanita walked across the room with Clete's clarinet cradled in her hands. She placed it in Clete's lap and stepped back and said, "The boys think it's time, Clete, and they won't say it, but I believe they got the feeling you been stonewalling 'em."

Clete rubbed his eyes and let the clarinet lie for a second, feeling the pleasant pressure of the heavy wood against the half erection he had waken with. His band-mates' women — Ellis' Ruth, Bob's Glenda, Butch's Evelyn — filed into the room from the hallway and settled in on the furniture. Clete looked from one face to another with one word — stonewalling — echoing around inside his head. He lifted his clarinet, felt its solid weight. He fingered the familiar keys and licked the dry reed. After a few random warm-up notes — high-pitched toots that sent Ginger slink-

ing out of the room — he blew solo into Ellington's 'Just Squeeze Me.' He completed the sweet, slow melody without a hitch. Then he laid the clarinet on the end table and smiled at his tearful audience.

The boys in the band gathered around him, pulling him out of his chair to administer their bear hugs. Clete was stiff and embarrassed, but nobody seemed to notice. When the men were finished with him, the ladies moved in for their turn. Clete relaxed for them and hugged back, smelled their perfumes, felt his growing erection press on somebody's (Glenda's) leg. This is more like it, he thought; this is what I meant.

LIKE SAMSON AND DELILAH BLUES

Clete — dead-tired after his physical therapy — shuffled behind his walker from the car to the recliner and fell into a deep sleep in front of the T.V.

His wife Juanita, who had been in charge of his grooming since the stroke, decided that she had had enough of that ridiculous comb-over swatch of hair and she cut it (snip, snip) off of his slumbering head with her sewing scissors and threw the mess in the trash.

Clete woke up with a cool breeze blowing on his bare scalp, ran his hand over the naked skin and slumped down into a deep depression.

"Honestly," Juanita said to her neighbor Ruth, "I didn't think he'd take it so hard; I mean, who was he kidding with that hair? Everybody knew he was bald." Clete sat in his chair staring at nothing. He had started drooling again.

Ruth's husband Ellis went home and got his San Diego Padres baseball cap and brought it back and snugged it down on Clete's head. Clete raised his eyes from the rug and gave him a 'Thank You' look.

Within a week, Clete was feeling better; he was adjusting to his new look. If he could have dredged up the words from his cerebral cortex, he would have referred to his appearance as mature, or perhaps distinguished.

His physical therapist Cindy — a sturdy young girl with a pretty face and a fragrant starched-white uniform — said to him: "I like your haircut, Mr. Johnson." She muscled him into position between the parallel bars, then ran her fingers lightly over the white, soft, slightly rippled skin on his scalp. The feel of it made her giggle. Then